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Context and Pragmatics

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Abstract

By exploring the faces of context from the perspective of components, knowledge and cognition, this article concludes that context is at the core of pragmatic studies, which examines how context contributes to meaning and pragmatics will gain momentum when linguists and non-linguists tap into the field of context.

Keywords: Context, Pragmatics, Cognitive, Relevance, Function

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is centrally concerned about the use of language in context. The role and significance of context for pragmatics cannot be overestimated. "Context is a constitutive concept of pragmatics, because without context pragmatics simply could not exist." (Poznan, 2004:45) It's when the context has joined the family of semantic studies that pragmatics begins to find suitable channels to make its voice heard and develops into a relatively independent discipline. (He, 2000:4) More importantly, context provides a link for cognitive and psychological bend of pragmatics. Context is important and indispensable for the study of pragmatics. (Yi, 2016:17) This article will explore the changing faces of context, the new dynamics it has acquired from cognitive linguistics and its function. And it concludes that as a dynamic notion, context will gather momentum for pragmatic studies.

2. The changing faces of context

There are two broad categories to expound on the notion of context. Context can be understood as some factors abstracted from concrete situations and will have some influence on participants. Context can also be viewed as background knowledge shared by participants. This article will present the changing faces of context from the perspective of components and perspectives of knowledge based on the classification made by He Ziran and Cheng Xinren in their book *Contemporary Pragmatics*.

2.1. Understanding context from the perspective of components

According to M.A. Halliday, there was a theory of context before there was a theory of text. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski coined the term context of the situation while he needed a term to express the total environment, including the verbal environment, but also including the situation in which the text was uttered. Malinowski also introduced the notion of context of culture, when he found cultural background behind the immediate sounds and texts played a significant part in the interpretation of meaning. (Wolf, 1989:259)

English linguist Firth borrowed Malinowski's idea and developed it for the purpose of "expounding the meaning of particular instances of language use." (Halliday, 1985:6) Firth wanted a framework that could be used for the study of texts as part of a general linguistic theory.

American anthropologist Dell Hymes also worked on the definition of context. He put forward a S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model with 16 components and he grouped the 16 components into eight divisions. He identified the setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms and genre.

For him, setting and scene refer to time and place of a speech act. Participants mean speaker and audience. The audience can be distinguished as addressees and hearers. Ends include purposes, goals and outcomes. Act sequence refers to the form and order of the event. Key can be explained as clues that establish the tone, manner or spirit of the speech act. Instrumentalities include forms and styles of speech. Norms refer to social rules governing the event and the participants' actions and reactions. Genre is the kind of speech act or event.

Later Lewis introduced factors concerning former texts, and he used the concept of aforementioned to describe the context.

Halliday focused on the success of our actual communication and established the framework of the context of the situation. This framework includes three features: the field, the tenor and the mode.

The field refers to what is happening. It concerns the nature of the social action that is taking place. The tenor refers to who is taking part. It mainly looks after the notion of the participants, their statuses and roles. The mode refers to what part the language is playing. It includes what it is that the participants are expecting language to do for them. (Halliday, 1985:9-11)
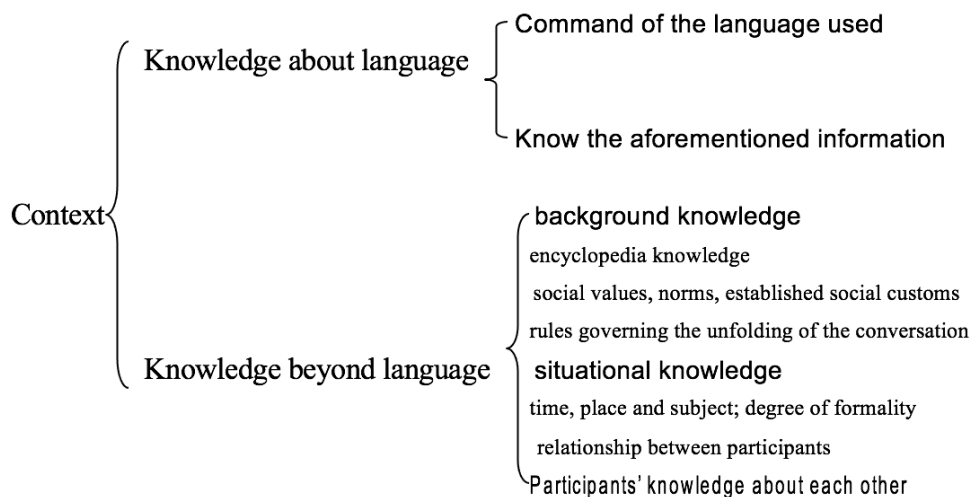
Mey presented a broad view of context as knowledge, situation and co-text. He believed that context was a dynamic rather than static phenomenon; therefore, contextual factors were in steady development during the process of social interaction. He also introduced the idea of "wording the world." He said, "in order to understand another person's wording, I have to participate in his or her contexts, to world the word with him or her." (Poznan, 2004:49)

Jeff Verscheren located "language users within contextual correlates of adaptability represented as a linguistic context and the mental world, social world and physical world. He found a broad framework which included knowledge, situation and co-text. His mental world activated in language use contains cognitive and emotive elements. He extended it to include personality, beliefs, desires, wishes, motivations, and intentions. The social world is examined by its social settings, institutions, cultural norms, and values. The physical world refers to participants' bodily posture, gestures, gaze, gender and physical appearance. (Moyer, 1995:136)

2.2. Understanding context from the perspective of knowledge

Lyons tries to understand context from the perspective of knowledge. He summarized six dimensions of knowledge that can construct context. According to Lyons, every participant should be aware of the part he played in the speech act and his status; each side should note the time and place of the speech act; participants are conscious of the degree of formality of the speech act and can decide the proper communicative medium accordingly; participants know how to adapt their language to the topic of the speech act and properly decide the dialect used in the specific situation; participants understand the importance of the scope of language (He Ziran and Chen Xinren, 2004:113).

Chinese scholars He Zhaoxiong and Yu Dongming also put forward their framework. They summarized the knowledge factors of context as follows: (He, 2000:21)

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                                        ┌ Command of the language used
              Knowledge about language  ┤
                                        └ Know the aforementioned information

                                        ┌ background knowledge
                                        │   encyclopedia knowledge
                                        │    social values, norms, established social customs
Context ┤                               │   rules governing the unfolding of the conversation
                                        │ situational knowledge
              Knowledge beyond language ┤ time, place and subject; degree of formality
                                        │   relationship between participants
                                        └ Participants' knowledge about each other
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Leech viewed context as "any background knowledge assumed to be shared by speaker and hearer and which contributes to the hearer's interpretation of what speaker means by a given utterance." (Poznan, 2004:51)

Levinson restricted context to the basic parameters of the context of utterance which include participants' identity, role, location, and assumptions about knowledge. Dijk established "new context models" and believed "for each proposition and speech act they must know what recipients know. Hence, they must also model such knowledge as relevant part of the communication event." (Dijk, 2008a:7) He also proposed a knowledge device (K-device) for the management of knowledge in discourse.

3. Relevance theory and context

Based on the cognitive environment and aimed at establishing relevance, cognitive context sheds new light on the concept of context. Blakemore explained that people generally aim to bring about the greatest improvement to their overall representations of the world for the least cost in processing. Sperber and Wilson assumed that this would be achieved by processing only information that is relevant.

3.1. Principle of relevance

Sperber and Wilson's theory began with the idea of manifest. A fact is manifest to a person at a given time if he/she understands it and accepts its representation as true. The cognitive environment of an individual is the set of facts and assumptions that are manifest to him/her at a given time. To be manifest is to be capable of being perceived or inferred. An individual has certain cognitive abilities and exists in a particular environment, and these together determine what he/she can and cannot perceive or infer.

Sperber and Wilson assumed that human beings attempt to aim at the most efficient information processing possible. For them an individual's particular cognitive goal at a given moment is always maximizing the relevance of the information processed. (Wilson, 2016)

Sperber and Wilson believed any individual would have a body of manifest assumptions in his/her command. They are the products of each individual's cognitive ability, cultural and social group identity, educational background, and physical environment. In a communication process, some of these assumptions are retrieved or are inferred from two or more assumptions. Thus, in a conversation, interpreting meaning means to work out the consequences of adding the assumption expressed by the utterance to the set of assumptions already present in the hearer's mind and Sperber and Wilson named these pre-existing assumptions as context. They believed a context is a psychological construct, representing the hearer's assumptions about the world at any given time. (Wilson, 2016)

3.2. Principle of relevance and the notion of context

From the standpoint of relevance theory, context can be seen as a set of premises, namely, assumptions, mental representations, which are used in the deductive process of interpretation. The context behaves as a dynamic mental representation in which memory, information, knowledge, and the inferential capacities of the individual are used.

How does an individual select a particular set of assumptions from among all possible contexts available to him/her? Sperber and Wilson argued that context selection depended on relevance considerations. An individual selects a context that will maximize the relevance of the information being processed. Any individual has a great amount of information available, but only a small part of it is useful to process new information. When a deductive process starts, the speaker has in memory an initial set of assumptions to begin the interpretation process. Actually, the initial context includes information recently processed. If one cannot find the optimum relevance, he/she will extend the context until the optimum relevance is present. (Luchjenbroers, 1992:603-604)

3.3. Contextual effect

What effects can an utterance have on a context? According to Sperber and Wilson, the process of interpreting utterances implies the achievement of contextual effects. Information is relevant to an individual if it has a contextual effect in an accessible context. New information is processed automatically by the deductive system in relation to the assumptions stored in the mind. There exist three different contextual effects:

First, the assumptions already present in the context together with the assumptions expressed by an utterance can logically imply one or more new assumptions by way of a deductive process. In this way old and new information combine to create new information.

Second, a new assumption can cause the erasure of one or more assumptions from the context.

Third, a new assumption can strengthen or weaken one or more assumptions in the context.

All in all, relevance is constant and context is the variable and relevance provides the baseline for the construction of the context. (ibid, 605)

4. Function of context

In terms of its relationship with pragmatics, the function of context mainly lies in its influence on the expression and interpretation of meaning.

Context cannot exert its influence on its own. It participates in the process of decoding meaning. From the speakers' point of view, its function can be understood at least from three aspects:

> First, it will decide the content to be expressed according to the purposes and goals of communication.
> Second, it will define the style of speech act according to the setting or scene.
> Third, it will decide the channel of communication in accordance with the situation presented.
> And from the audience's point of view, the function of context includes the following three dimensions:
> First, it helps to assign reference
> Second, it serves as an anchor to get rid of pragmatic ambivalence and vagueness. (He Ziran and Chen Xinren, 2004:118-121)

Semantic enrichment is realized when context helps the audience to fill the information gulf. And Dijk believed that his model for understanding context would offer "a general foundation for pragmatics." (van Dijk, 2008b:5)

5. Conclusion

Exploring the notion of context is at the core of pragmatic studies. Almost all the landmarks in pragmatic studies are erected with a new understanding of context. Fortunately, context is a breathing concept, so pragmatics will gain new momentum when linguists and non-linguists continuously use fresh perspectives to tap into the field of context.

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